

What is the Third Commandment? Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. But what exactly does that mean? What does it mean to keep the Sabbath? What does it mean to break the Sabbath? I think there is no other commandment, Christians, that causes quite so much confusion as this one does. And not just today, but also in the time of Jesus. It is a commandment which has always caused many questions. What exactly does it mean? But Jesus shows us in our Gospel reading for today what this commandment means.

Mark tells us, beginning in verse 23: "One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'" The disciples apparently were very hungry as they were going about their traveling, and so they were plucking grain and eating it as they walked along. I'm sure most of us know exactly what that's like, although they were making a meal out of it. They weren't just eating a little bit here and there. But this was perfectly lawful for them to do, even though it wasn't their grain, because the Law of God specifically said that this was okay. In Deuteronomy chapter 23, for example, we are told: "If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain." The idea was all of this belongs to God anyway, so it's only right to give it, some of it, to those who are in need: to give it to the poor, to give it to the widows, to give it to the orphans, and so forth. There was no sin in taking a little. It only became sin when you took too much, when you took more than you needed in that moment. So the issue with the Pharisees, then, is not the fact that they are doing this. The issue is when they were doing it. The Pharisees were convinced that it was wrong to do on the Sabbath. They were convinced that Jesus's disciples were breaking the Third Commandment.

Now, why did they think this? Partly because of what the Old Testament says about the Third Commandment, or rather what the Old Testament does not say. Because in the book of Exodus, God goes on to explain what he means by this commandment. He says in Exodus chapter 20: "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates." God actually goes on to say a little bit more than that, but notice that what this says here is: you shall not work. It doesn't actually say anything else. It's not very specific about what that means, which can lead us to ask all kinds of questions. Well, what exactly is that? What if I do this on the Sabbath? Is that work? What if I do that on the Sabbath? Is that work? And so forth. And Israel certainly asked these kinds of questions. Israel wanted to know what exactly this commandment meant. But that was also because of another reality in the Old Testament. Breaking the Sabbath in the Old Testament brought a very severe judgment. In the book of Numbers, for example, we're told of a man who was gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And they brought him to Moses to find out what was going to be done to him. And we're told in Numbers chapter 15 that "the Lord said to Moses, 'This man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.'" Breaking the Sabbath in the Old Testament was a capital crime. It was a very serious thing indeed!

Since it was so serious, people wanted to know: what exactly does it mean? We need to make it clear. And so they began to ask all kinds of questions, come up with all kinds of possible scenarios in an attempt to make it clear. And by the time that we get to Jesus, they had come up with so many of these hypothetical situations that ultimately that's all that they cared about. They

weren't concerned with what God's Word actually said. What mattered more to them were all of these questions and answers. What mattered more to them was their traditions. They didn't care what God said. They cared what this or that rabbi had to say about keeping the Sabbath. And for that reason, they condemned the disciples even though they had done nothing wrong. That in itself shows the problem with this kind of an approach.

Because ultimately, Christians, they missed the point. The point of the Third Commandment is that it is open-ended for a reason. It is not about a list of rules. It's not about a list of things that you can and can't do, all of these little hypotheticals and trying to figure out exactly what you're supposed to be doing. Rather, the point of the Third Commandment is to keep our eyes focused on God, to hold him up above all other things.

This is why the Sabbath was even applied to things like the Sabbath year in the Old Testament. Every seventh year, Israel was commanded not to plant any of their crops. We're told in Leviticus chapter 25: "For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard." Not planting seems like a death sentence, especially in a time when they depended on the harvest. How are they going to make it through that year? How would they make it through even the next year when they needed that food? But God promised that he would provide for them. God promised that he would give them enough to eat in that year and in the next. All they had to do was trust him. And the only way that they could do that is by not planting at all. And that's the same of the weekly Sabbath. By setting aside their work, they kept their eyes focused on God. Because when God is the center of all that we do, Christians, then we see the point of the Third Commandment.

But the Pharisees still couldn't see that. They were more concerned with their rules. In fact, they thought that the rules were the commandment. And so Jesus goes on to say, starting in verse 25: "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" Jesus is referring here to 1 Samuel chapter 21. David was on the run from Saul who was trying to kill him. And David left in such a hurry in an attempt to get away from Saul that he didn't take anything with him, not even food. So when he came to the city of Nob, to the tabernacle, he asked the priests for food. And the priests gave him the bread of the Presence. That was the holy bread, the bread which was offered up every single day as a sacrifice to the Lord, and a bread which was only supposed to be eaten by the priests. In fact, we're told in Leviticus chapter 24, speaking about the bread, that: "it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual due." So by all rights, this seemed like the wrong thing to do. It seemed like David was wrong to take the bread for himself. It seemed like the priests were wrong to give it to him. But God does not condemn David. David did nothing wrong. Because the point of the Law is not to cause harm and suffering. The point of the Law is not to be a burden, the way the Pharisees had turned it into. The Law is meant for a blessing. It is meant for our good. And if David showed us this by his example, how much more so the Son of David, who is God himself? As Jesus says: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

So what does all of this mean for us today, Christians? What does it mean for us to keep the Third Commandment. First of all, we keep the Third Commandment by seeing what it means in the time of the New Testament. Because all of the specifics of the Old Testament have come to an end. The capital punishment is no longer there. There's not even a specific day anymore, because all of these things have come to an end in Jesus Christ. This is why Paul says in Colossians chapter 2: "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." So the shadows of the Old Testament, all of those old specifics, have disappeared in the light of the New. But that doesn't mean that the commandment has no meaning. We still should set aside one day in seven. And the Church from the beginning has set aside Sunday as that day. It doesn't have to be Sunday, but it is. This is the Lord's Day on which we gather together as the body of Christ. And part of keeping the Third Commandment means gathering together with the body. It means being in church.

The second way in which we keep the Third Commandment is by keeping our eyes fixed on God, by setting aside the things that we do. Again, this is not about rules. This is not about keeping a list of a bunch little things that we're supposed to do. That's missing the point. Rather, I think the better way to go about this is to ask ourselves a simple question: "Is what I am doing distracting me from the things of God? Where is my focus? Is what I'm doing something that can wait? Is it something that's distracting me from church? Something that's distracting me from prayer?" Because many times, Christians, I think we'll find that the things that we are doing can in fact wait. Too often we are busy just for the sake of being busy. If Israel could wait an entire year without planting because they trusted in the Lord, I think we can wait just one day.

The last way in which we keep the Third Commandment is by realizing that it does not mean that we do nothing. It is not about just being idle. Rather, it is about being in the things of God. It means coming to worship, even if we have a hundred things that we need to do. It means being in prayer, even if it seems like the list that we have is always getting longer and it never comes to an end. It means hearing and reading the Word of God, even when our to-do list gets longer and longer and longer. Because ultimately, Christians, our work will end. The things that we do in this life will not go on forever. But God does go on forever. So why not focus on what is truly important? Why not focus on what is truly eternal? Because when our eyes are on God, when he is above all other things, then we see the point of the Third Commandment.

So Christians, rest in the Lord. It will not hurt you. In fact, God means it for your good. God means to bless you through this rest. Because through it we see what is truly important. Through it we keep our eyes fixed on God until that day that we enter into the eternal Sabbath rest. The world and everything that is in it will come to an end, but our God goes on forever!

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of the Sabbath, bless the time which we spend in your Word this day, so that we may be built up in true faith and enter into the great Sabbath rest which you have prepared for those who love you; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.